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ABSTRACT

A college instructor, already experienced as a consultant and trainer in written and oral business communication, became convinced by two students in an executive management training program that gaining an insider's perspective might be exceedingly valuable. A few years later, the instructor got such an opportunity: she became a corporate editor for Chevy Chase Federal Savings Bank in Washington, D.C. She learned that as an employee she did not have the luxury of simply severing the client-consultant relationship and walking away if things did not work well. She had more at stake and took greater risks; the highs were higher and the lows could be lower. This type of "total immersion" learning is recommended to anyone who can get it. The instructor decided that she would rather be a consultant on the outside, "working in," than on the inside looking out. The lessons of the organization provided her with a perspective and a reality check she could have gotten no other way. (A marketing strategy to get the kind of experience the instructor had is included.) (RS)

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# Suddenly, I Was One of *Them*! Why Writing Consultants Must Learn the Lessons of the Organization

Conference on College Composition and Communication
Roundtable Prensentation

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## The Great Awakening

Several years ago, I was teaching in an executive management program at Purdue University. As I entered the classroom one afternoon, I heard a voice on the left call out "$20.00 says she hasn't." A voice on the other side of the room called back, "$20.00 says she has."

This class was composed of middle managers from General Electric Company, most of whom had degrees in engineering or computer science. They had been in the program for several months and had formed some very distinct opinions about the quality of the instruction they were receiving.

Mystified by the bet making I had overheard, I asked what was going on.

One of the bettors responded that the class had been laying wagers on which of the faculty members teaching in the program had "real world" work experience--what the exec. ed. students called "real work"--and which ones had spent their lives within the confines of academia.

I replied that I had years of experience as a consultant and trainer in written and oral business communications, which was one reason I had been chosen to teach in the executive program.

"Close, but no cigar," chortled the first bettor. "But better than some of the others," shot back the second bettor.

They continued by explaining that while they had learned a lot of management theory in the exec. ed. program, they were disappointed in the lack of real-world applications faculty were able to discuss. These managers felt that academics who lacked any experience as "insiders" were seriously hampered in their ability to understand the constraints inherent in the daily realities of their workplace.

I had thought experience as an outside consultant was just about ideal—seeing interesting things about a business and helping to solve communications problems without having to put up with the daily corporate grind. But the more these managers talked, the more I became convinced that gaining an insider's perspective might be exceedingly valuable.

## Reality Check

A couple of years later, I got such an opportunity. A headhunter recruited me for a staff position at Chevy Chase Federal Savings Bank in Washington, DC, to be the organization's corporate editor, reporting to the director of marketing. My particular responsibility was the development, management, and maintenance of the bank's image on paper—especially in its advertising, newsletters, and credit card mailings, including its direct mail and collection letters.

While I was at Chevy Chase, I learned some important lessons of the organization that I want to share briefly with you this afternoon. I'm going to address these lessons in terms of advantages and disadvantages, but they can be summed up this way:

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> As an employee in an organization you don't have the luxury of simply severing the client-consultant relationship and walking away if things don't work out well. As an employee rather than a consultant, in many ways you have more at stake, are taking greater risks. The highs are higher; the lows can be lower. And some aspects of business communications can truly be learned no other way than from the inside.

These truths began to gel for me about three weeks after I had started work at Chevy Chase's corporate headquarters. I had been thinking about this new job as if it were simply a lengthy consulting assignment, my only frame of reference. But on this particular day as I drove to work, I found I was thinking about the day ahead as an insider, not an outsider. All at once the thought went through my mind, "I'm not a communications professor anymore. I'm a business manager. I'm one of *them*."

## Advantages of Being Inside the Organization

**Organizational goals and direction:** How well they are understood and implemented down through the organization.

**Power structure:** What the politics and channels of communication actually are versus what the organizational chart says they should be. Time to learn who must approve, who must cooperate, and who can impede.

**The desirable versus the feasible and doable:** What actually can be accomplished in the organization within a given time frame.

**Trust, persuasion, and jawboning:** Time to sell new ideas and practices through interpersonal relationship building and familiarity.

**Microscopic view:** Opportunity to learn the business's nuances and experience the complex ramifications of decisions/actions.

## Disadvantages of Being Inside the Organization

**"Fieldocentrism":** View of where area of competence fits into the overall mission of the organization. Communications agenda must be subordinated to organization's goals. Is NOT most people's top priority.

**Measurable results:** Evaluated by same criteria as everyone else. Accountable to boss on daily basis. May encounter unaccustomed, close supervision. Suffer initially from learning curve, "new kid" syndrome, without protection of consultant's aura of expertise.

**Loss of glamour, mantle of authority:** Must compete with every other business function for time and scarce resources. Just one of the bunch, not "someone special" brought in short-term by higher-ups.

**Follow-through:** Can't draw up big plans and propose nifty solutions, leaving someone else to carry them out. Have more at stake if proposals fail.

**Diminished objective distance:** Lose outsider objectivity, tend to "buy in." Become blinded by and blind to organization's culture. View colored by sympathy or antipathy to persons and points of view over time.

**Total Immersion**

I believe the General Electric managers were right. It is possible perhaps, but not very likely, that a consultant can understand "in the gut," as business people are fond of saying, what really takes place in business unless that consultant has spent significant time within business organizations. The lessons I learned are invaluable and irreplaceable—things I don't think I could have learned any other way than by identifying completely with and being responsible for some aspect of the daily operations of a business organization. Their goals and tasks were my goals and tasks. I was Chevy Chase Bank, not someone retained by Chevy Chase Bank.

I recommend this type of "total immersion" learning to anyone who can get it. How to get it? The short answer is: Do it for pay if possible; give it away on the street if necessary. Here are some suggestions for a marketing strategy:

**Marketing Strategy: Matching Offerings with Publics**

**KEY WORDS FOR PROPOSING THE IDEA**

| To Businesses | To Your Department |
|---|---|
| Internship | Sabbatical |
| Independent contractor | Summer research |
| Project management | Field work |
| In-service residency | Curriculum development/revision |
| | Program development |
| | Faculty development |

**POTENTIAL CONTACTS**

| In Business | In Your Academic Institution |
|---|---|
| Every business person you know who has hiring authority | Placement director (see if business school has its own) |
| Human resource directors | College recruiters visiting campus |
| Corporate recruiters | Contract instruction office |
| Personnel dire[illegible] | Adult education/continuing ed. |
| Chamber of Co[illegible]merce | Business/management faculty |
| Anyone for whom you have ever done consulting or training | |
| Business and professional associations, e.g. Association of Professional Writing Consultants | |

**Lessons Learned**

What I learned from the experience--about business communications and about myself? The **real** lessons of the organization, for example:

My assigned organizational goals--collection letters

- fitting a rigid computer-generated format is difficult to reconcile with the flexibility needed to created a reader-based, you-attitude, user-friendly letter

- the real costs of changing anything in business, including the company's correspondence

- how much more difficult a customer service orientation is to maintain on a daily basis. Why the goals of top management (customer service/corporate image) conflict with the workday experience and conventional wisdom further down in the organization: why credit card dept. managers like sounding mean on paper.

My personal goals--choosing between the corporation and academia

- RIFs: how it feels to be an expensive new employee when the first firings ever happen to two long-time employees (one of whom is pregnant).

- That I couldn't write collection letters for the rest of my life (no matter what else the job entailed). Clock-watching and flextime vs the corporate culture.

- Promises, promises. Being told you're going to work for Mr. Big is not the same as actually working for Mr. Big. (If you're lucky, you may see him across a crowded room.)

- Meaningful work. Is writing and editing (i.e., making a profit for a bank) really "socially redeeming"?

Still, my corporate experience was invaluable and I wouldn't trade it for anything. There are great corporate jobs out there. However, I've decided that personally I'd rather be a consultant on the outside "working in," than on the inside looking out, with my nose pressed to the glass. The lessons of the organization provided me with a perspective and a reality check I could have gotten no other way. But for me, the intellectual freedoms available in the academic setting and the opportunity to interact with students every day are a stronger draw than full-time corporate work. Fundamentally, businesses are about products, services, and money, as they should be. Fundamentally, universities and colleges--in spite of everything-- are still about ideas and ideas. In this context, the words of Revlon's Charles Revson have a great deal of relevance for me:

"In the factory, we make cosmetics; in the store, we sell dreams."

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